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Holding Center gets cleaning for federal visit

By **Matthew Spina**

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They're taking the wire brush to the Erie County Holding Center.

With federal inspectors scheduled to arrive next Monday, county crews are scrubbing and

painting to give the jail that squeaky-clean look.

Workers inside the Holding Center say that painting crews have been busy for weeks.

Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz said some county workers were offered time-and-a-half pay

over the weekend to continue the cleanup.

"I saw a couple of people who work for the Public Works Department, and they told me they

were offered overtime to come in to help with painting and plumbing, basically to make the

Holding Center shiny and new," Poloncarz said.

"They were told it was basically to get it as nice as possible in a short period of time. I

found it interesting that they haven't done this over the long haul, but now they are willing

to offer people overtime to make that happen," he said.

Holding Center inmates, current and former, have complained for years about the jail's

filth.

So has the staff.

"The place is a hellhole," said Betty Guise, who worked as a Holding Center records clerk

two years ago before resigning because, she said, she found the conditions and the supervision

unbearable.

"Their answer to mold was to paint it over. It's time they cleaned it out real good. The property area was a disgrace."

She said she saw roaches and heard mice. Papers were stacked five feet high, or more. She

said she had wished the State Commission of Correction inspectors were as concerned about the

employees' working conditions as they were about inmate conditions.

The Holding Center in recent months also has received new rugs or had rugs steam-cleaned,

staff members report. Trustys are wielding paint brushes, too.

Fixes also are under way at the Correctional Facility in Alden. County Attorney Cheryl A.

Green, who has been calling the shots in the county's defense of the U.S. Justice Department

lawsuit, moved through the county pen weeks ago generating a list of needed physical improvements.

But soon after, Green cautioned against linking the new to-do list to any Justice

Department visit. She explained that she was looking for insurance risks at the correctional

facility, just as she does with all county buildings.

"The county engages in regular maintenance of all of our facilities, including the Erie County Holding Center," she said Monday, by e-mail. "Unlike private citizens and

businesses

which take proper care of their belongings, inmates tend to be particularly destructive of

county property for which they bear no financial responsibility."

U.S. District Judge William M. Skretny on March 6 granted the Justice Department's request

to, at first, examine the county's suicide-prevention measures, especially those at the Holding Center, which has reported more suicides than the correctional facility.

Skretny allowed the Justice Department to enter the facilities next Monday and Tuesday.

However, both Green and the Justice Department are asking him to rule on whether the Justice

Department must schedule formal depositions to interview a county employee or even an inmate,

as Green insists.

The Justice Department lawsuit filed last year alleges the county fails to protect the rights of inmates in the area of suicide prevention as well as health care, mental health care

and protections from abuse by both guards and other inmates.

A week ago, Sheriff Timothy B. Howard's administration announced it had fired three deputies after an inmate was punched in an unprovoked attack. But another complaint about

recent abuse had already been filed.

Marquez Mack, a 22-year-old accused of robbery, reports that he was beaten while in handcuffs Jan. 29, according to his mother, Annette Woods. Mack, who is now on crutches, was

with a group of inmates who had become loud while inside the county courthouse and was singled

out when he mouthed off, Woods said.

She said Mack filed an internal complaint, and she has written to the FBI about the incident.

Howard recently assured reporters that his staff investigates such complaints, but his office did not have an immediate comment Monday about Mack's incident.

Comments

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